

ARTICLE APPEARED

ON PAGE 30

WALL STREET JOURNAL

19 June 1985

Thinking Things Over

—By Vermont Royster—

CIA Imbrolios

You go away on a three-months journey and return to find things pretty much as before. Seems monotonous.

More battles in embattled Lebanon. Trouble in Latin America. Name-calling between the White House and the Politburo. The French being French, as usual, in the councils of Europe. President Reagan and Congress still disputing the budget and taxes. The same arguments over school busing, affirmative action and "equal pay for equal work."

And the CIA once more involved in controversy.

The latest hubbub arises from press reports that the CIA trained some Lebanese in the art of dirty tricks, and that subsequently these Lebanese pupils tried an unsuccessful attack on Hussein Fadallah, leader of the Shiite Moslems. Secretary of State Shultz denies any CIA involvement.

Of the truth of that I know not. But now there's a book by Stansfield Turner, former CIA director, and to judge by the excerpts in Newsweek it should raise new hackles down at Langley and further arm CIA critics.

Turner is a four-star admiral with a varied background. After the Naval Academy he earned a master's degree at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. Thereafter he served mainly in destroyers, commanding the USS Horne. As head of the Naval War College in Newport he revolutionized the curriculum to include the study of philosophy and politics, to the consternation of more traditional naval officers.

Put him down, then, as a bit of an intellectual maverick. Following a tour in command of southern NATO forces, he was appointed by President Carter as CIA director, and he quickly ruffled old hands at the agency.

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He's still at it. He is critical of past "covert" activities at the agency and the activities of its paramilitary branch. Among them he mentions the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and the issuance of that manual to the "contras" that seemed to condone "neutralization" of Nicaraguan officials, for which read assassinations.

Adm. Turner criticizes these on both practical and ethical grounds. For one thing, "covert" means secret, and as a practical matter none of these activities can, in fact, remain secret for long—and they haven't.

As for the ethical question, the admiral concedes that the Soviets do this sort of thing routinely. The question in his mind is whether we should "stoop" to imitate the Soviets.

On the practical question Adm. Turner is surely right. Sooner or later what is supposed to be covert, or secret, leaks out and makes headlines. The ethical question is a bit trickier.

The origins of that part of the CIA's activities have their roots in the OSS of World War II. Then, our national objective was unconditional surrender and almost any covert activity behind enemy lines was considered not only within bounds but necessary. But in Adm. Turner's view "translating that attitude to the peacetime 1980s was a serious mistake."

The admiral himself is a bit ambiguous about whether this country should engage itself at all in covert activities, thinking it "impossible to set absolute standards of ethics." He is not the least ambiguous in his view that the CIA should not be left alone to make such decisions. We should never turn over the custody of our ethical standards to "any group of individuals who divorce themselves from concern for public attitudes," which often happens with the CIA.

"American intelligence operating in the past in confidence that it would not be held accountable committed errors that both disgraced our nation and, in the longer run, imperiled our very intelligence capabilities."

Since he thinks the maintenance of a good intelligence service is vital to our national security, the alternative he proposes is to separate intelligence gathering from any and all involvement in covert activities. If we are to have covert operations they shouldn't be undertaken by the same people who must provide unbiased intelligence to the president. Don't mix the two functions.

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The mechanics he suggests is to have a director of national intelligence in the White House separate from the head of the CIA and strengthen his authority over the National Security Agency. This would require a new charter for the intelligence community. "The principal legislation governing organization and responsibilities is 35 years old and hopelessly out of date."

It's a proposal to spark new controversy, and the mechanics he suggests has its own problems. It risks more not less

"politicizing" of intelligence gathering by putting it in the White House, a place where politics is never absent.

Nonetheless, his main idea—the separation of intelligence gathering from other activities—is long overdue. The present CIA just grew like Topsy and should never have been allowed to become a two-headed agency in the first place.

Personally, I doubt whether it behooves the U.S. to engage in such efforts as mining the harbors of other countries or trying to destabilize other governments, even hostile ones. I doubt that this serves our interests, because, if nothing else, it makes us appear no better ethically than the Soviet Union.

But if we are to have such so-called covert actions the decision should be made at the highest level accountable to the nation and not by those whose primary job is gathering intelligence about the world around us. The present CIA will be forever involved in imbrolios until one of its heads is cut off.